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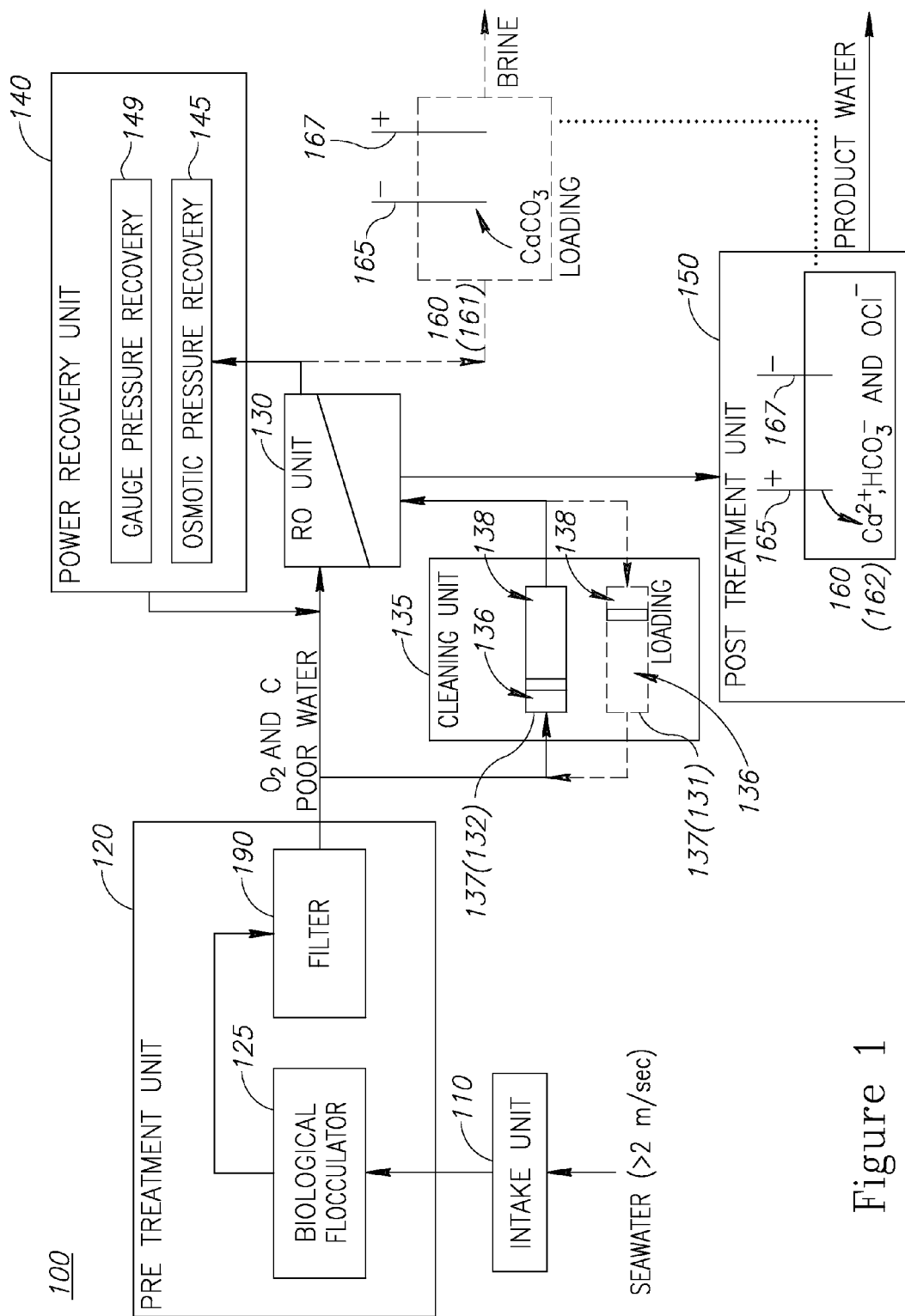


Figure 1

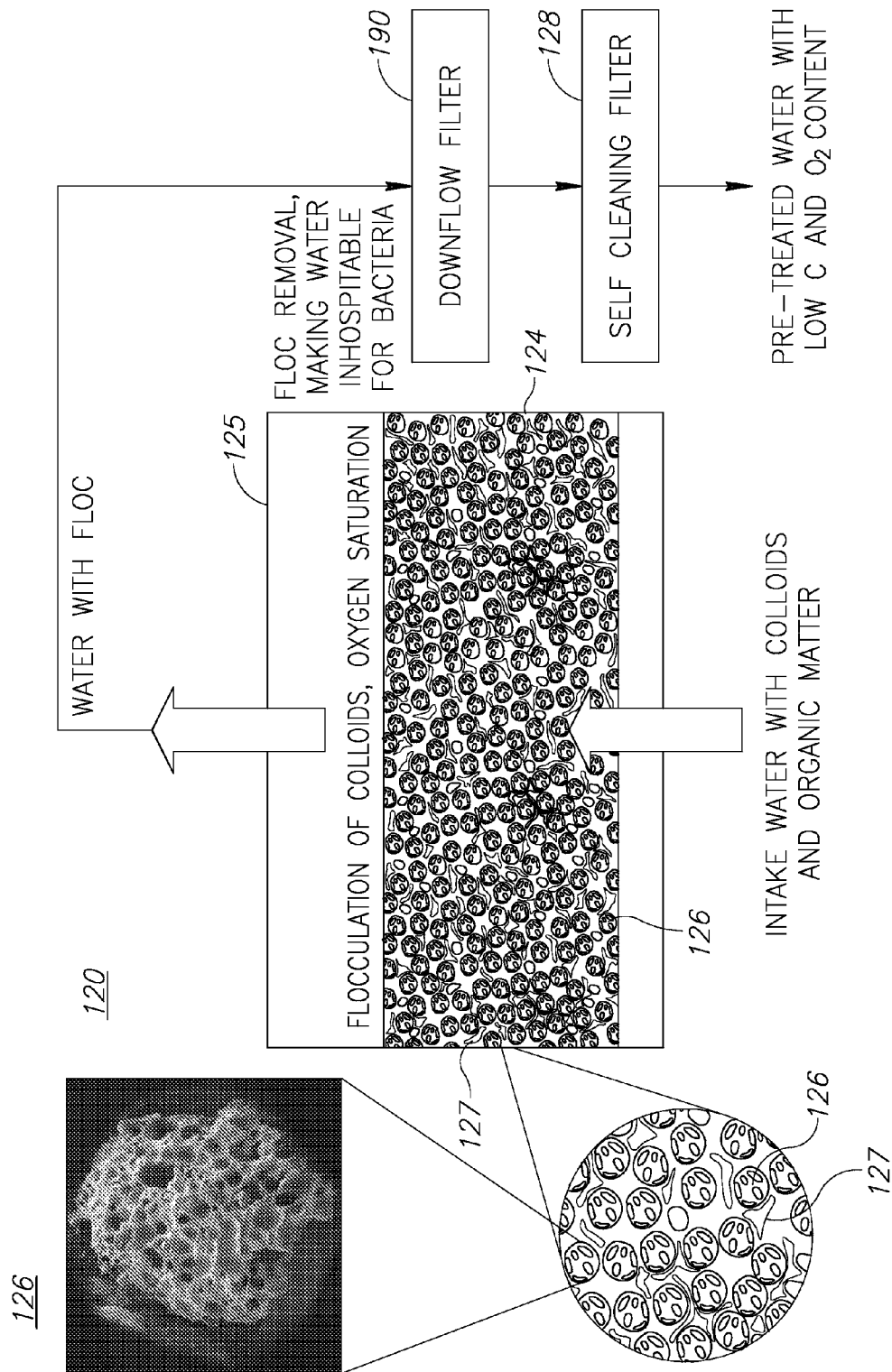


Figure 2

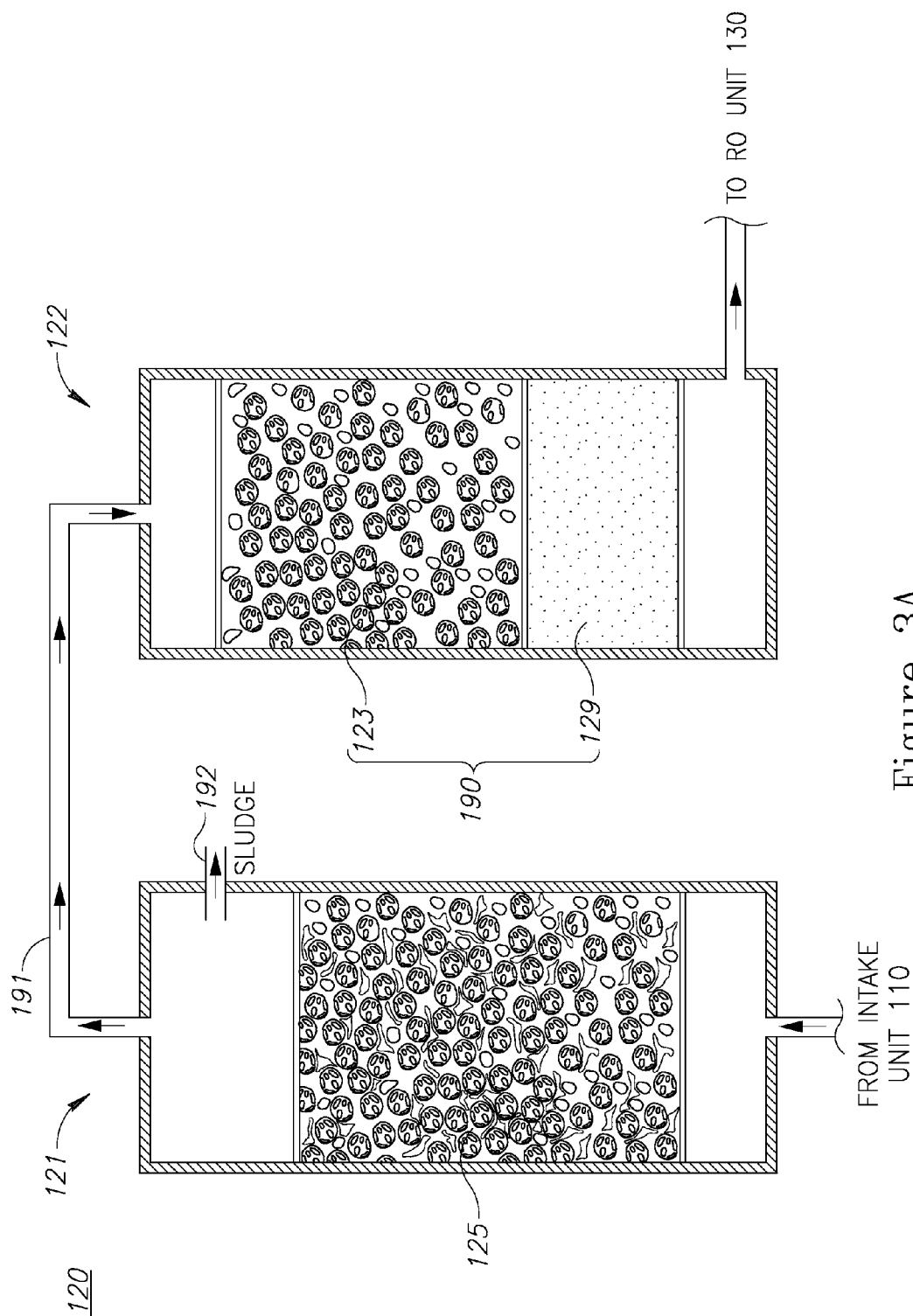


Figure 3A

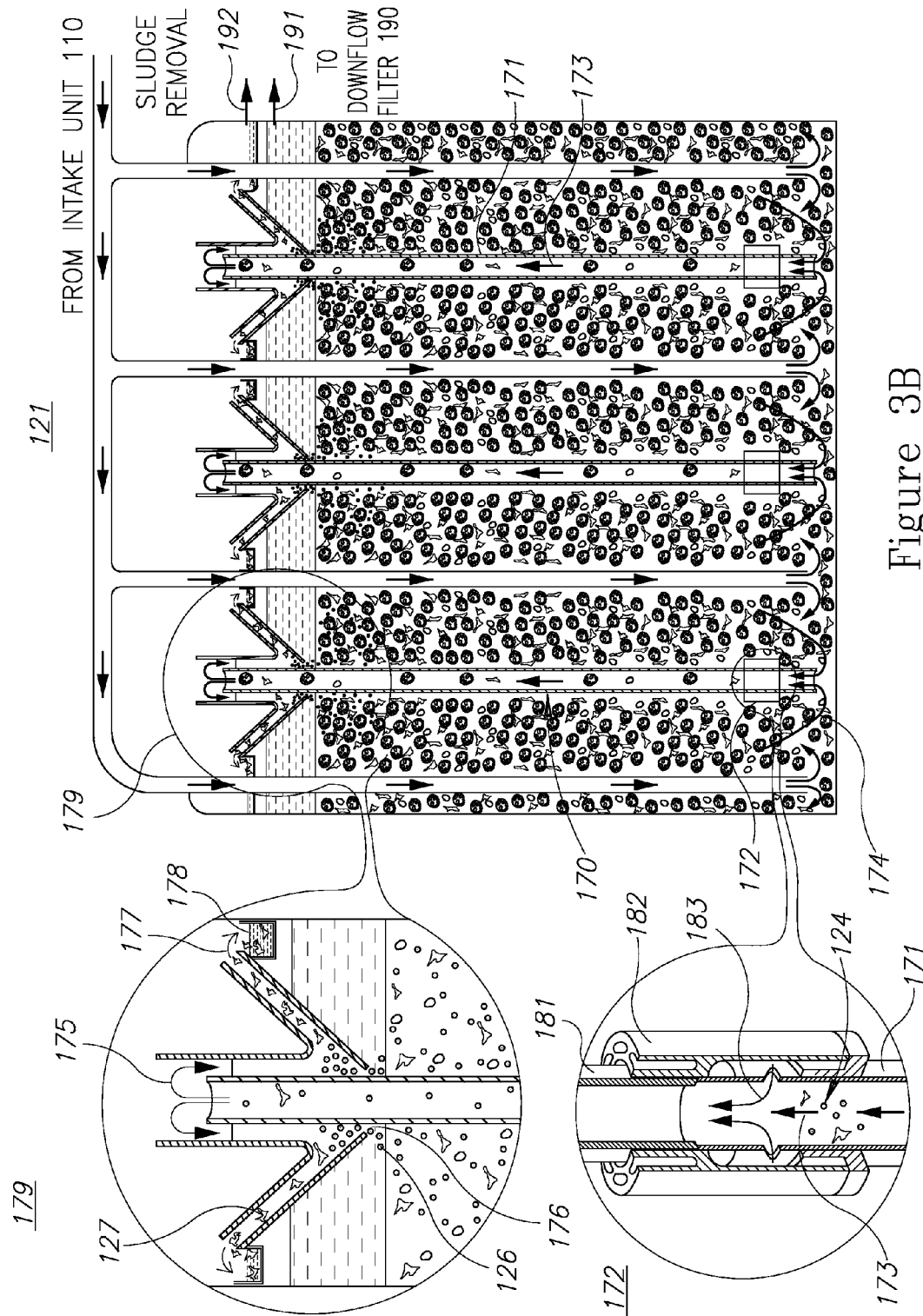


Figure 3B

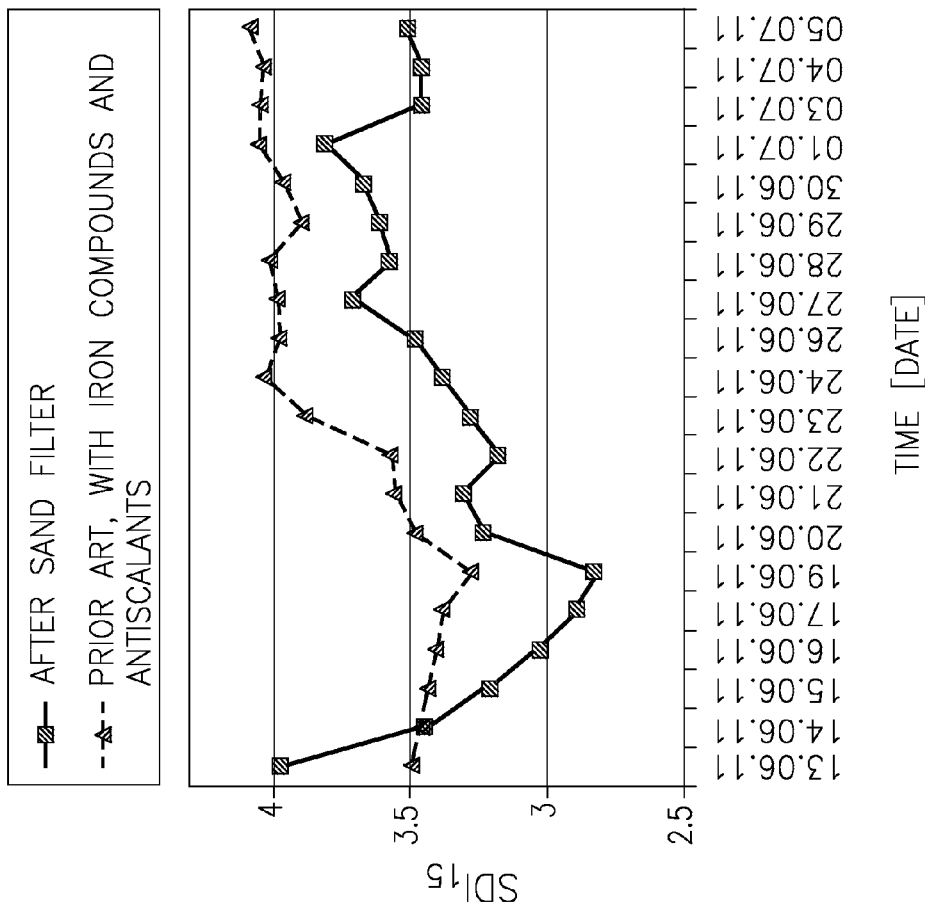


Figure 3D

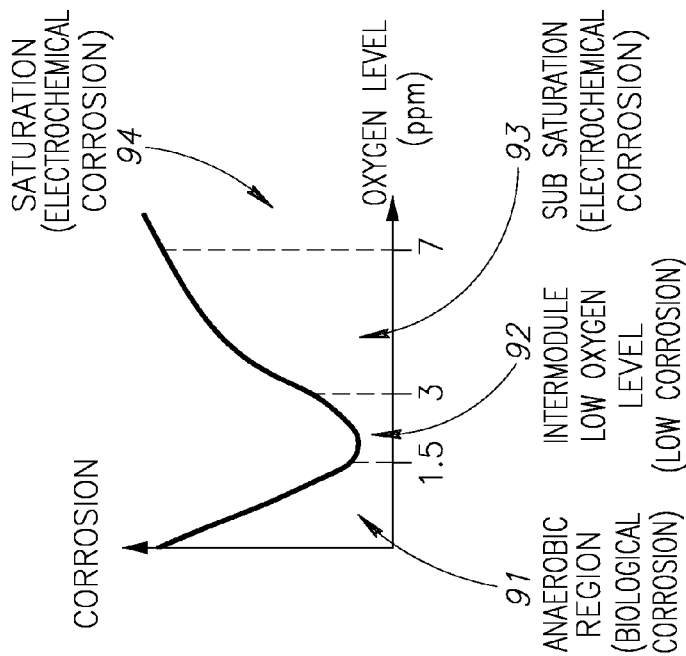


Figure 3C

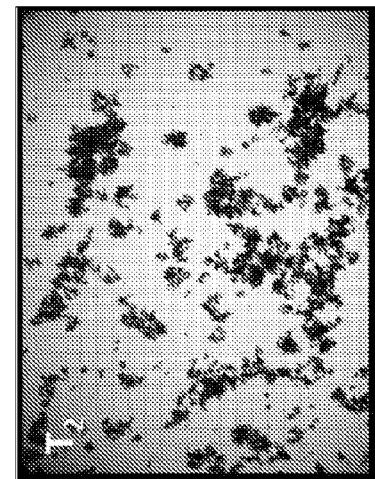


Figure 4A

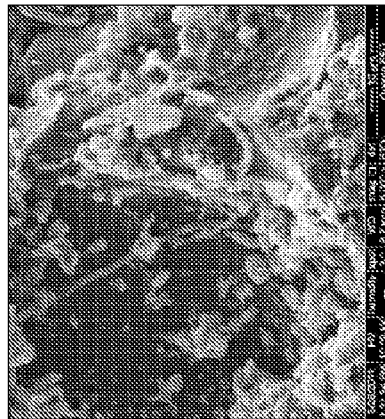


Figure 4B



Figure 4C

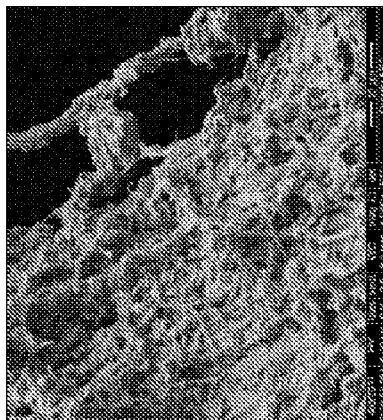


Figure 4D

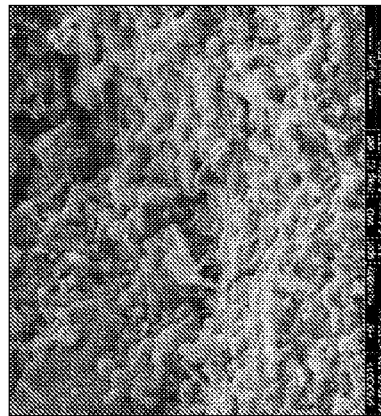


Figure 4E

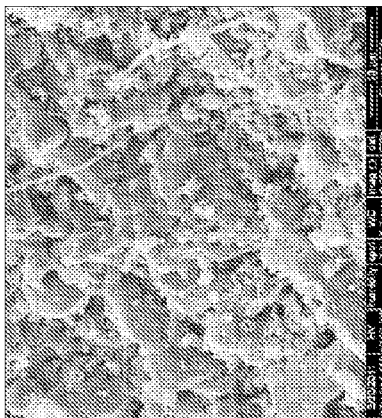


Figure 4F

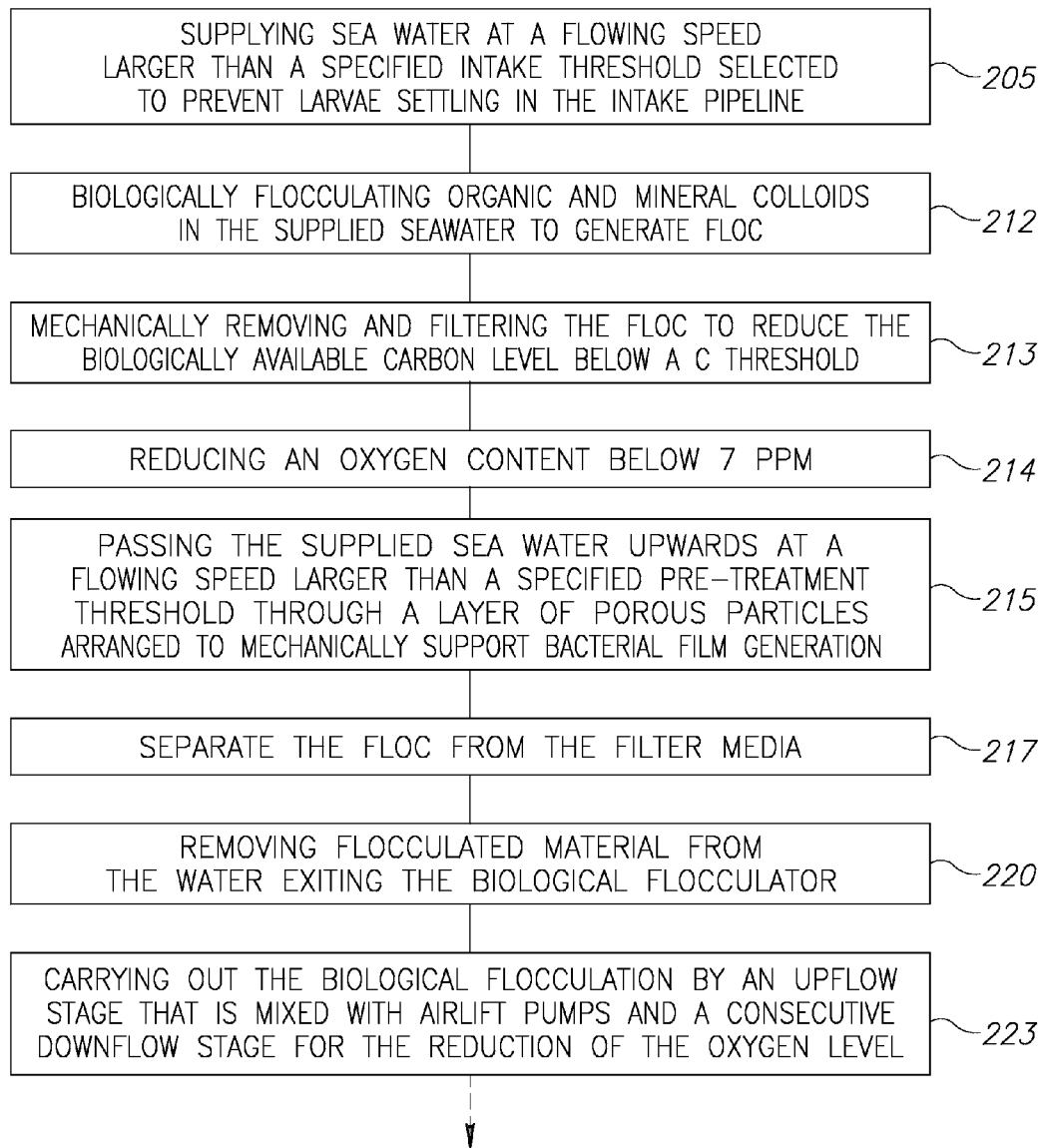
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Figure 5

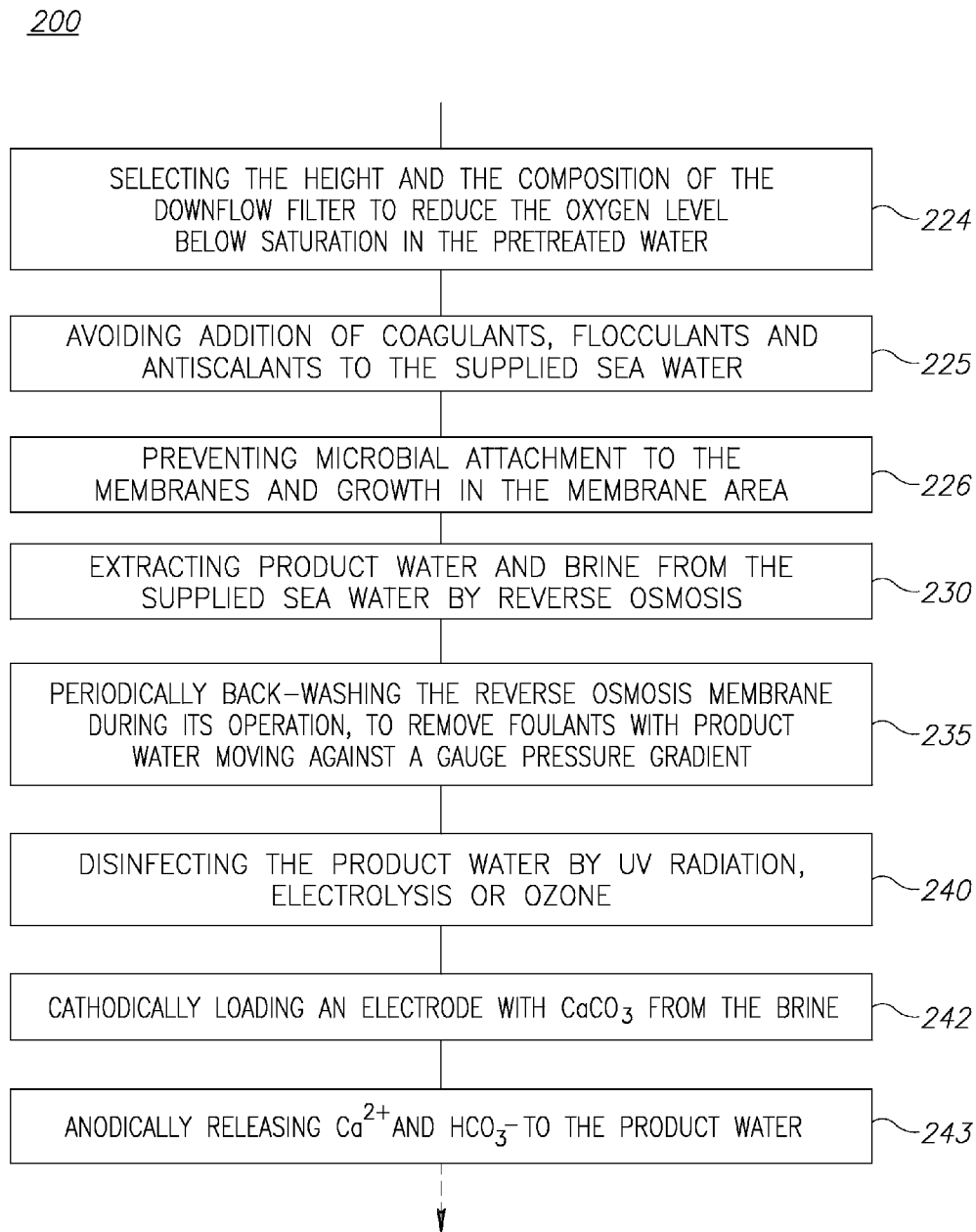


Figure 5 cont.

200

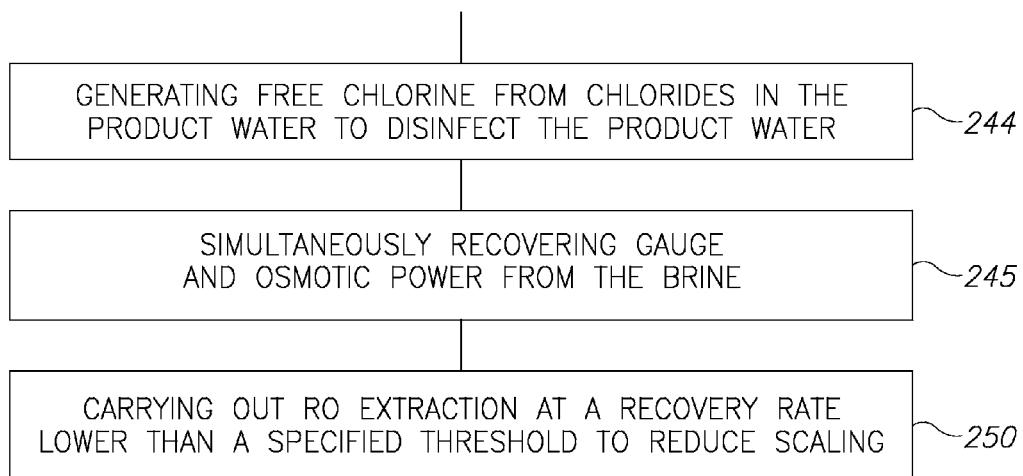


Figure 5 cont.

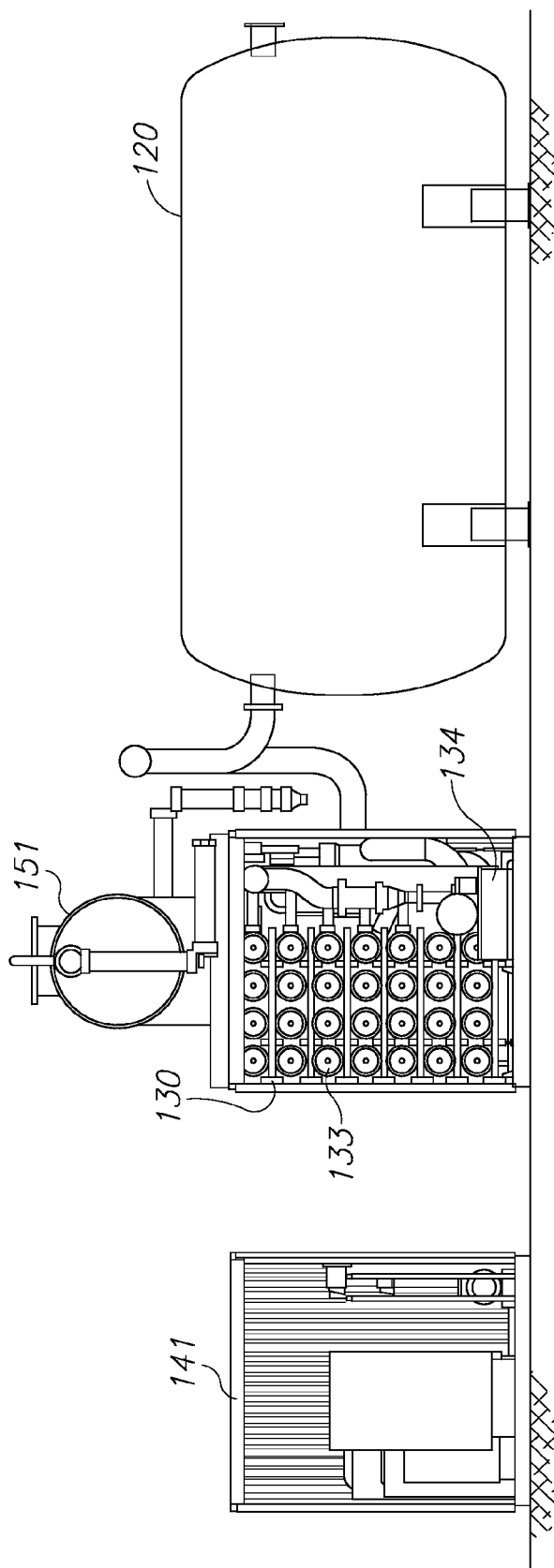


Figure 6A

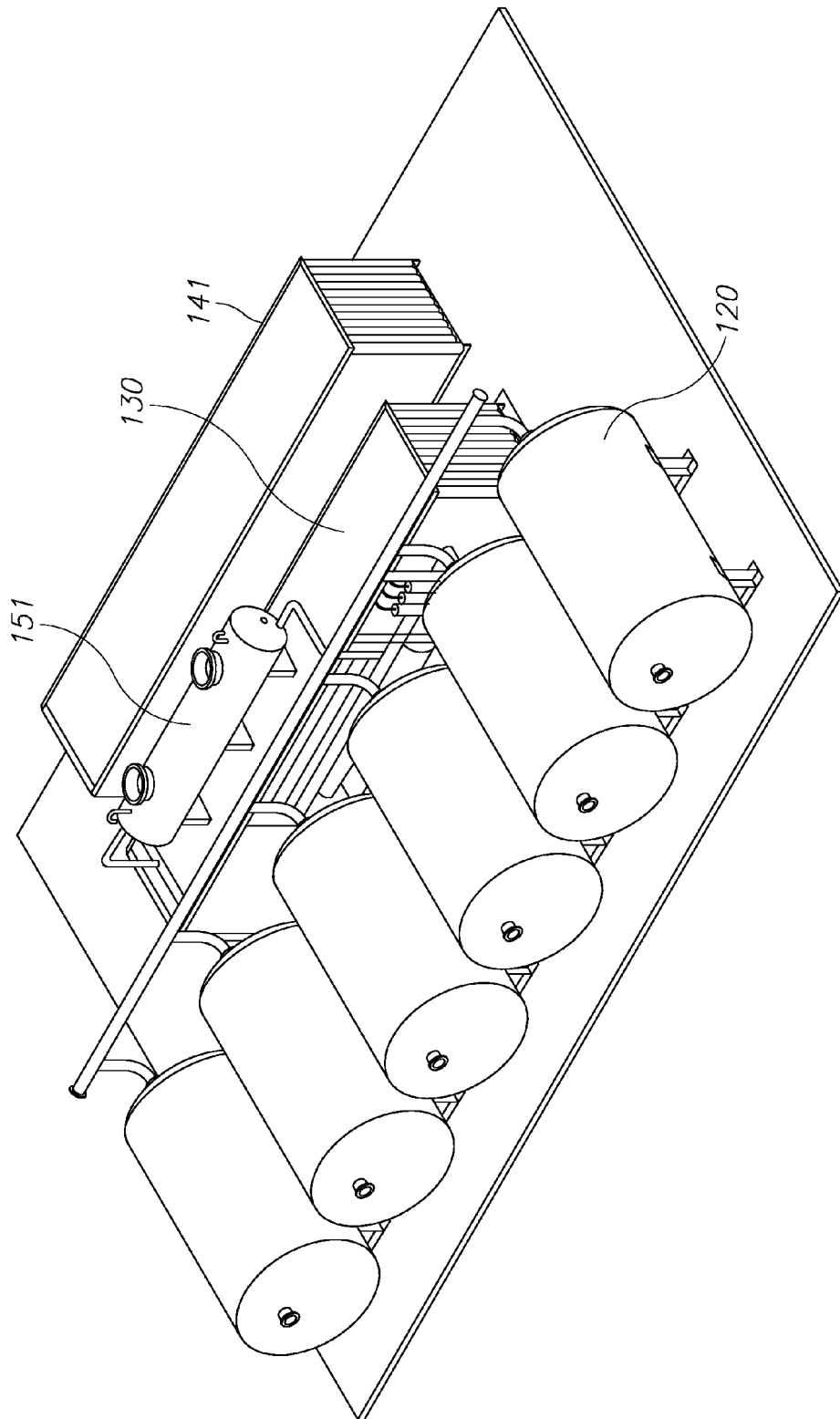


Figure 6B

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CHEMICAL FREE AND ENERGY EFFICIENT DESALINATION SYSTEM

BACKGROUND

1. Technical Field

The present invention relates to the field of desalination, and more particularly, to an easy to operate, environment friendly reverse osmosis desalination system.

2. Discussion of Related Art

Overcoming water shortage often requires desalinating water at a high energy expense and at high environmental prices resulting from added chemicals which are returned to the environment.

For example, in reverse osmosis desalination, chemicals are added to the feed seawater to prevent scaling and fouling in the membranes. Such chemicals may include acids and pH regulators, ferric compounds, various antiscalants (scale inhibitors), chlorine, various biocides (e.g. algae killing compounds), etc. Some of the antiscalants serve as nutrients to algae and bacteria, and hence increase biofouling. Some of the chemical additives in the pre-treatment stage are then neutralized by chemicals added at the post treatment stage. Some of the membrane cleaning chemicals are dangerous chemicals, and much of them is expelled in the brine exiting the desalination plant, causing environmental problems. Moreover, some of these materials may reach the final product in cases of local failures in the membrane or in the membrane flushing process.

Handling these chemicals requires extensive logistic efforts and solving of various environmental problems. These difficulties render desalination plants to be large and remote from residential areas to which they supply water.

WIPO Publication No. 2006/057249 discloses a reverse osmosis (RO) system with a pretreatment unit combining a biological active carbon column and a microfilter or an ultrafilter to remove suspended particles, organic matter and microorganisms from the seawater.

BRIEF SUMMARY

One aspect of the invention provides a desalination system comprising an intake unit pumping seawater via an intake pipeline and providing the pumped seawater to a pre-treatment unit connected to a reverse osmosis (RO) desalination unit, the desalination system characterized in that: the desalination system is operable under avoidance of any external addition of chemicals, the chemical-free operability achieved by the following: the intake unit is arranged to operate at a flowing speed between 1.5 and 3 m/sec in the intake pipeline to prevent settling of larvae in the intake pipeline, the pre-treatment unit comprises an upflow biological flocculator and a downflow filter, and is arranged to supply the seawater to the upflow flocculator at a flowing speed between 15 and 60 m/hour, the biological flocculator comprises a layer of porous particles arranged to mechanically support biofilm generation to bind and flocculate colloids from the water without adding coagulants or flocculants of any type to the water, wherein the pre-treatment unit is further arranged to separate floc from the porous particles, and wherein a height and a composition of the downflow filter are selected to reduce an oxygen level below saturation in the pretreated water, and remove remaining floc, to suppress microbial attachment and growth in the RO unit.

These, additional, and/or other aspects and/or advantages of the present invention are: set forth in the detailed descrip-

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tion which follows; possibly inferable from the detailed description; and/or learnable by practice of the present invention.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The present invention will be more readily understood from the detailed description of embodiments thereof made in conjunction with the accompanying drawings of which:

FIG. 1 is a high level schematic block diagram of a desalination system according to some embodiments of the invention;

FIG. 2 is a high level schematic block diagram of a pre-treatment unit according to some embodiments of the invention;

FIGS. 3A-3D illustrate the structure and function of the pre-treatment unit according to some embodiments of the invention;

FIGS. 4A-4F illustrate floc and bacterial film on porous particles according to some embodiments of the invention;

FIG. 5 is a high level flowchart illustrating a method of operating a desalination system and a flocculator without external addition of chemicals, according to some embodiments of the invention; and

FIGS. 6A and 6B are schematic illustrations of the system in cross section (FIG. 6A) and perspective (FIG. 6B) views, according to some embodiments of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Before explaining at least one embodiment of the invention in detail, it is to be understood that the invention is not limited in its application to the details of construction and the arrangement of the components set forth in the following description or illustrated in the drawings. The invention is applicable to other embodiments or of being practiced or carried out in various ways. Also, it is to be understood that the phraseology and terminology employed herein is for the purpose of description and should not be regarded as limiting.

Inventors have taken a new approach to prevent fouling, scaling and corrosion in a reverse osmosis desalination system, an approach that avoids using added chemicals, in order to simplify the operation logistics and costs, and to allow economically efficient desalination system at a smaller scale, and in proximity to urban areas.

The new approach starts from the biological origin of much of the fouling, scaling and corrosion in the membranes. Accordingly, the environmental conditions in the desalinated water are set to be inhospitable in order to suppress bacterial growth and bacterial attachment to the membranes. These environmental conditions include a low oxygen level, that is intermediate between aerobic conditions (with electrochemical corrosion) and anaerobic conditions (with biological corrosion), and a low biologically available carbon level that provides little nutrition to bacteria. This approach separates most of the organic and mineral matter before the desalination membranes, and generates inhospitable conditions in the membranes for the development of bacteria that have come through the membrane. An additional advantage of not adding chemicals in the pretreatment, is the avoidance of problems that require addition of other chemicals to neutralize (e.g. sodium bisulfite neutralizes chlorine, soda neutralized acids).

In particular, organic and mineral colloids in the intake water are generally hard to separate, and require adding chemicals such as coagulants and flocculants to remove the colloids from the water in the prior art. The current invention

uses biological organisms to coagulate and flocculate the colloids. This is contrary to prior art approaches that prevent any biological growth in the filtration media.

In one example, the biological organisms are cyanobacteria and coccid bacteria, which coagulate organic and mineral colloids and develop on certain types of media, such as tuff and/or expanded clay. These organisms cover the media in a biological flocculator (see below). They also produce substances that expand from the coating of the bacteria and capture biologically degradable organic matter that serves as nutrients, as well as matter which is not biologically degradable, but remains attached to the bacteria. The continuous cleaning of the media (e.g. by mixing and stirring the media in the flocculator causing floc removal) causes the bacteria to regenerate these glue-like substances and maintain the biological activity of the organisms—biological flocculation is maintained active. The inventors have found that cyanobacteria and coccid bacteria cover the flocculation media at various depths in the media, and are kept clean by the mixing procedures that are presented below.

FIG. 1 is a high level schematic block diagram of a desalination system **100** according to some embodiments of the invention. Desalination system **100** comprises an intake unit **110**, a pre-treatment unit **120**, a reverse osmosis (RO) desalination unit **130**, and a post treatment unit **150**. FIG. 2 is a high level schematic block diagram of a pre-treatment unit **120** according to some embodiments of the invention. FIGS. 3A-3D illustrate the structure and function of the pre-treatment unit according to some embodiments of the invention. FIGS. 4A-4F illustrate floc and bacterial film on porous particles according to some embodiments of the invention. FIGS. 6A and 6B are schematic illustrations of desalination system **100** in cross section (FIG. 6A) and perspective (FIG. 6B) views, according to some embodiments of the invention.

Intake unit **110** is arranged to pump seawater via an intake pipeline **111** and supply the pumped seawater at a flowing speed larger than a specified intake threshold speed (e.g. 2 m/sec, or between 1.5 and 3 m/sec) selected to prevent settling of larvae in intake pipeline **111** and in intake unit **110**. Specifically, intake unit **110** does not introduce chlorine into the supplied sea water.

Pre-treatment unit **120** is illustrated in FIG. 2. Pre-treatment unit **120** is arranged to generate an oxygen content lower than an O₂ threshold, and an amount of accessible organic carbon lower than a C threshold in the pre-treated water. Pre-treatment unit **120** specifically avoids adding iron disulfides, coagulants, flocculants, and antiscalants to the pre-treated water. Pre-treatment unit **120** may comprise Multi Media Filters (MMFs) that include anthracite and sand filtration layers.

Pre-treatment unit **120** comprises an upflow biological flocculator **125** operating with an upwards directed flow, a downflow filter **190** and optionally a self-cleaning filter **128**.

Biological flocculator **125** is arranged to flocculate organic and mineral colloids in seawater using biological organisms building up in the filter. While colloids in the sea water are removed chemically in prior art (as they otherwise cause fouling in the membranes) the proposed chemical free system flocculates the colloids, i.e. removes the colloids suspended in the water into a form of flakes, or floc that are suspended in the water. Flocculator **125** is arranged to maintain an environment that is naturally super saturated with oxygen, e.g. flocculator **125** may be continuously aerated to maintain the water saturated or over-saturated with oxygen, to support organismal growth. The organisms in biological flocculator **125** gather the colloids as nutrients, e.g. by forming a bio-

films. The organic matter is removed from biological flocculator **125** as floc consisting of biofilms, organisms and bound colloids.

Downflow filter **190** then removes the flakes from the water (it does not efficiently remove colloids from sea water). While flocculator **125** operates at least at oxygen saturation (e.g. between 8 and 10 ppm), filter **190** reduces the oxygen level in the water below saturation e.g. down to 7 ppm, 4 ppm, or 2 ppm, depending on the specific configuration of pre-treatment unit **120** and the input water quality. Another specification for filter **190** may be to reduce oxygen level in the water to 50-70% of the oxygen saturation value. The lowered oxygen level in the water transferred to RO unit **130** reduces significantly, or prevents the biological activity in the sea water and further reduces corrosion in the pipework.

FIG. 3C illustrates schematically the effect of the oxygen level in the water on corrosion of the metal parts in RO unit **130**. The range of oxygen levels is schematically divided into four regions: anaerobic region **91**—substantially anaerobic conditions with biological corrosion (up to ca. 1.5 ppm); low oxygen level region **92**—an intermediate region with low corrosion (between ca. 1.5 and 3 ppm); sub-saturation region **93**—aerobic conditions but significantly below oxygen saturation levels with electrochemical corrosion (between ca. 3-7 ppm, depending on water conditions); and saturation region **94**—oxygen saturation or super-saturation in the water, with intense electrochemical corrosion (above ca. 7 ppm).

Within sub-saturation region **93**, corrosion strongly depends on the oxygen level, and by regulating the oxygen level with the configuration of downflow filter **190**, corrosion may also be controlled in a chemical free manner. While oxygen saturation is maintained in flocculator **125** to support colloid flocculation, oxygen level and biologically accessible carbon levels are reduced in the water delivered to RO unit **130**. The specific oxygen and carbon thresholds are still under research, and may be changed with accumulating practice. The inventors suggest that a 30% reduction of oxygen level may be enough to prevent biofouling by making the pre-treated water inhospitable to bacteria. Alternatively, an oxygen level of 3-4 ppm, or even 2-3 ppm may be effective.

Upflow biological flocculator **125** is arranged to receive the supplied sea water from below at a flowing speed larger than a specified pre-treatment threshold speed (e.g. 50-60 m/hour, or between 15 and 70 m/hour). Flocculator **125** comprises a layer of porous particles **124** arranged to mechanically support bacterial film generation in order to yield biological flocculation of organic material thereupon. Layer **124** is depicted schematically by illustration of porous particles **126** and bacterial film **127** supported by porous particles **126**. Bacterial film **127** removes by adhesion various colloids, organic material, and microorganisms entering flocculator **125** with the sea water. The upward flow in flocculator **125** prevents compaction of layer **124**, hence keeping the biological film available and operable. In addition, bacterial film **127** mineralizes some of the organic material. Impacts between particles **126** in layer **124**, occurring due to the upflow of supplied sea water, promotes the mechanical destruction of algae.

Layer **124** is schematically illustrated in FIG. 2 (as well as in FIGS. 3A and 3B) as a texture composed of porous particles **126** and floc **127** (floc **127** being parts of bacterial film **127** that are removed from the system). A micro photo in FIG. 2, taken by a scanning electron microscope, illustrates the porous structure of particles **126** in the case of ground tuff. For illustration purposes only, particles **126** are depicted in the texture as being much larger than their actual size, which is a few millimeters. The detailed illustration in FIG. 3B

depicts particles **126** as being smaller. A texture of sand in FIG. 3A is taken as points to distinguish between sand and porous particles **126**, although the actual particle sizes may be similar or only slightly larger. The different textures are not to be taken as indicating particle size.

A specific design of pre-treatment unit **120** is presented in FIG. 3A. Biological flocculator **125** comprises an upflow section **125** in container **121**. Downflow filter **190** in a second container **122** may comprise a downflow coarse filter **123** characterized by coarse and porous particles that are relatively light, positioned above a fine filter **129** characterized by finer and heavier particles. The aim of this configuration is to trap remaining floc in coarse filter **123** to prevent blockage of fine filter **129** with an upper sludge layer.

For example, coarse filter **123** may be similar in composition to biological flocculator **125**, fine filter **129** may comprise a sand or ground basalt filter. More generally, coarse filter **123** may comprise particles with a specific gravity around 2.4, in respect to particles in finer filter **129** that may have a specific gravity of 2.4. Examples for materials of coarse filter **123** are expanded clay, ground tuff, activated carbon and anthracite.

Generally, downflow filter **190** may be any multimedia filter, or a single media filter, depending on the specific configuration of the system.

Overflow from container **121** moves (**191**) into container **122**. Sludge, i.e. water with floc, may be removed (**192**) from container **121** or from the water transferred to second container **122**. Containers **121**, **122** are presented schematically, and may each comprise several containers interconnected with appropriate pipework and managed according to an appropriate temporal plan.

FIG. 3B presents a more detailed design of container **121**, in which airlift pumps **170** are used to mix and aerate biological flocculator **125** to support organismal growth and remove the generated floc. Mixing the media (particles **126** in flocculator **125**) facilitates both the maintenance of oxygen saturation in flocculator **125** and the regeneration of the biofilms activity of flocculating colloids (as explained above).

Pipes **171** are vertically inserted into container **121** and air is injected **172** at their immersed bottoms (see lower detailed illustration in FIG. 3B). Air is injected (**183**) from air pipes **181** connected to pipes **171** through injection units **182**. Injected air **183** causes an upwards motion **173** of the water in pipe **171** which mixes the substrate, sucks in **174** water at the pipe bottoms, and moves floc **127** upwards. At the tops **179** of pipes **171** (see top detailed illustration in FIG. 3B), water and filter substance—particles **126** from layer **124**—emerges **175**, and is gravitationally separated into particles **126** recovered through an opening **176** to layer **124**, water that is transferred **191** to downflow filter **190** container **122**, and floc **127** (in water) that is delivered **177** over channels **178** to a sludge treatment unit (not shown). The sludge treatment unit may include clarification stages, such as a dissolved air flotation (DAF) tank or lamella separators, to remove floc, especially in cases of large amounts of organic material in the seawater. Generally, water from container **121** may be delivered to container **122** with or without intermediate floc removal.

FIGS. 4A-4F illustrate floc and bacterial film on porous particles according to some embodiments of the invention. FIG. 4A illustrates floc in water removed from flocculator **125**. In contrast to the invisible colloids in the intake water, the floc produced by the bacterial film is separable from the water without use of chemical means. FIGS. 4B-4F illustrate bacterial film **127** upon porous particles **126** in different depth in flocculator **125**. While FIG. 4B illustrates reduced bacterial growth on less porous media (Filtralite, at 50 cm depth), FIGS. 4C-4F illustrate much stronger growth of bacterial film

of ground tuff as the filter media (in depths of 20 cm, 100 cm, 200 cm and 300 cm, respectively).

The extent of floc removal by pre-treatment unit may be expressed by a carbon threshold, which may be set at ca. 2-2.5 ppm of biologically available carbon, or total organic carbon (TOC). Alternative measures may be a turbidity below 0.2-0.5 NTU (nephelometric turbidity unit) or a reduction of chlorophyll levels by 80-90%.

While airlift pumps **170** separate floc **127** from porous particles **126**, floc **127** itself may be either separated from the water emerging from flocculator **125**, or be transferred with the water for separation in downflow filter **190**. In one example, a large amount, e.g. 80-90%, of floc **127** may be removed from the emerging water and a residual amount of floc **127** may be removed within a coarse part of downflow filter **190**. Floc removal may be carried out in different ways such as with or without sludge removal **192**, and with different constructions of downflow filter **190**. The exact values of both oxygen and carbon thresholds may depend on the levels of other nutrients in the pre-treated water, to temperature, sea conditions, etc.

In the described configuration, upflow biological filter **125** may be any type of flocculator, that absorbs colloids from the sea water and turns the colloids into floc, and allow at least a partial separation of floc **127** from the water. Downflow filter **123** further flocculates colloids, but also consumes oxygen in the water to reduce the oxygen level. Oxygen consumption is maintained due to lack of aeration. Downflow biological filter **123** may be structurally integrated with sand filter **129** as a downflow filter unit. Flow rate through upflow filter **125** may be larger (e.g. 50-60 m/hour) than the flow rate through the downflow filter unit (e.g. 10 m/hour), in order to provide for the turbulence and aeration of upflow filter **125** and intermediate floc removal.

In one experiment, oxygen level in flocculator **125** was constant at 10 ppm due to the constant aeration by airlift pumps **170** (see below), and was reduced along downflow filter **123** to 6-7.5 ppm. In the consequent downflow sand filter **129**, the oxygen level was further reduced, in one experiment to ca. 4 ppm.

The exact values are determined by the extent of aeration, materials sizes and heights (layer thicknesses) of filters **125**, **123** and **129**, as well as by the quality of water, flow speeds and other factors. For example, in one experimental configuration, in which both biological filters (upflow flocculator **125** and downflow filter **123**) include ground tuff, the diameter of containers **121**, **122** is ca. 1 meter, and the layer thicknesses (filter heights, or depths) are 3 meters, 2.4 meters and 60 centimeters for filters **125**, **123**, and **129** respectively. In another example, downflow filter **123** includes ceramic particles **126** (of the brand Filtralite, see below) and its height is reduced to 80 cm. In general, the height and the composition of the filtering layer in downflow filter **190** are selected to reduce an oxygen level below saturation in the pretreated water and remove remaining floc, in order to suppress microbial attachment and growth in the pretreated seawater.

FIG. 3D illustrates the reduction of organic matter in the seawater in comparison to a prior art facility, in which ferric and ferrous compounds are added to remove colloids, resulting in an acceptable level of organic matter. The results of the experiment carried over several months are presented in terms of SDI₁₅—15 minutes silt density index, which is a common measure in the field. While, in one experiment, upflow biological filter **125** still holds large amounts of organic matter (due to the stage of floc creation) represented in a high SDI₁₅, water exiting downflow sand filter **129** have about the same level of organic matter as chemically-treated water. Hence,

floculator **125** may achieve a similar level of organic matter removal as added chemical flocculation agents do. These results were achieved in a preliminary experiment, and are not to be taken as construing the current invention. Clearly, the structure and parameters of pre-treatment unit **120** are to be adapted to the quality and amounts of incoming water, and specific site requirements.

Another measure for the filtration level and carbon content is the turbidity which is measured in Nephelometric Turbidity Units—NTU. In several experiments, the turbidity of water exiting downflow filter **190** in several configurations was found to be similar to the turbidity of water exiting a chemical pre-treatment unit in a prior art desalination system over experimental periods of several months, in which the turbidity of both system fluctuated between 0.1 and 0.6 NTU due to seawater conditions. Corresponding SDI₁₅ values recorded during these periods were similar between the suggested chemical free pre-treatment unit **120** and the prior art pre-treatment units using antiscalants and ferric compounds, and fluctuated between SDI₁₅ values of 2.5 and 3.5. Additional results that are not presented in the current disclosure indicate the development of the organismal communities at different depths in filters **125** and **123** and the continuous reduction of SDI₁₅ values along downflow filter unit **190** combining filter **123** and sand filter **129**, reaching ca. 0.4 per meter in downflow filter **123** in one experiment. Additional results include the floc development in upflow filter **125**. In one experiment, floc sizes average 0.3 and reached well over 1 mm. Floc size may serve as an indication of filter efficiency and as a parameter for planning pre-treatment unit **120** for specific conditions.

Porous particles **126** in layer **124** may be microporous and have an extended surface area and may comprise ground tuff, expanded clay, activated carbon, ceramic particles and/or zeolite. Tuff is received from a natural source and is ground to the required optimized particle size. Ceramic particles are available at different physical characteristics. Several types of commercially available ceramic particles (e.g. Macrolite, Filtralite) were tested for the biological filter material in comparison to ground tuff. Zeolites are the aluminosilicate members of the family of microporous solids known as molecular sieves, and may constitute an inner surface area of hundreds of m² per gram. Several types of commercially available zeolites (e.g. Clinoptilolite—hydrated Sodium Potassium Calcium Aluminum Silicate, Chabazite—hydrated Calcium Aluminum Silicate) were tested for the biological filter material and compared to ground tuff. Various characteristics of filter material are drawn into consideration—primarily pore size and effective particle area, but also durability and mechanical strength, particle size, chemical composition and solubility.

Downflow filter **123** may be constructed similarly to upflow filter **125** from a layer of porous particles, even though their operation (flow regime and aeration conditions) is different. The type of porous particles **126** may however differ between filters **125**, **123**.

Downflow sand filter **129** is arranged to receive the sea water from upflow biological filter **125** or downflow filter **123** and remove flocculated organic material therefrom. Parts of bacterial film **127** that might be released from flocculator **125** are easily intercepted by sand filter **129** as they are substantially larger than the colloids entering with the sea water. As a result, the level of available organic material in the pre-treated sea water is reduced significantly. Downflow sand filter **129** also promotes biological mineralization of the organic material, thereby diminishing the amount of nutrients in the water

and reducing the oxygen content. In one experiment, downflow sand filter **129** reduced the oxygen level in the sea water to 4 ppm.

Overall pre-treatment unit **120** significantly reduces the levels of both oxygen and organic material, thereby chemotactic preventing microorganisms to settle in RO desalination unit **130**. As the membrane RO desalination unit **130** does not constitute a significant mechanical barrier to microorganisms, they pass through the system and are removed from the product water by disinfection. The low oxygen level also allows the use of low PREN (Pitting Resistance Equivalent Numbers) stainless steel in the high pressure piping, without causing corrosion damage.

Using porous particles **126** to support bacterial films **127** that carry out biological flocculation allows the avoidance of using iron as flocculation agent, thereby reducing scaling.

The inventors have discovered, that the configuration of pre-treatment unit **120** allows the membrane elements in RO unit **130** to stay scale free and unobstructed, without need to add iron, disulfides, coagulants, flocculants and antiscalants to the pre-treated water as is the common practice which is also accompanied by extensive efforts to supply, regulate and dispose these chemicals.

RO desalination unit **130** is arranged to receive the pre-treated sea water from pre-treatment unit **120** (at high pressure generated by a high pressure pump **134**) and extract product water (into permeate suck back tank **151**) and brine therefrom. RO desalination unit **130** may be further associated with an energy recovery unit **140**, arranged to recover energy from the brine. Energy recovery unit **140** may recover energy from either the gauge pressure of the brine by a gauge pressure exchanger **149** (e.g. DWEER or ERI), the osmotic pressure of the brine by an osmotic pressure exchanger **145**, such as a direct osmosis unit arranged to recover osmotic pressure of the brine, or both.

RO desalination unit **130** may be arranged to operate at a recovery rate lower than a specified threshold (e.g. 43-48% in comparison to a maximal recovery rate 50-53%, i.e. a ca. 10% reduction), to enable a specified reduction in the input pressure of the supplied sea water (thereby reducing energy consumption) and a specified reduction in brine salinity (thereby reducing environmental damage and dilution efforts). The lower recovery rate also reduces the scaling in RO unit **130**. Flow through system **100** may be regulated and controlled via unit **141** associated with the facility.

RO desalination unit **130** may be configured to operate at a maximal product water to energy use ratio and be optimized energetically. For example, the inventors have found out that a configuration of eight membrane elements per pressure vessel **133** optimizes the operation of RO desalination unit **130** in these aspects, and maximizes feed pressure of 45-50% recovery while using a single stage.

RO desalination unit **130** may be associated with a cleaning unit **135** arranged to back wash the RO membranes periodically to remove scaling nuclei. The inventors have found that avoiding the addition of Fe at the pre-treatment stage reduces significantly the extent of scaling, such that periodical washing of scaling nuclei and microcrystals from the membrane suffices to prevent scaling at larger scale, thereby sparing the usage of antiscalants.

Cleaning unit **135** may operate by periodically (e.g. daily) back washing the RO membrane, i.e. operating the RO membrane as a direct osmosis membrane. Reversing flow direction removes particles that accumulate near the membrane.

Cleaning unit **135** may be a direct osmosis cleaning unit **135** and comprise a back wash unit **137** that is arranged to deliver, utilizing a gauge pressure of the pre-treated water,

product water to at least one RO desalination element (e.g. pressure vessel **133**, FIG. **5**) within RO desalination unit **130** at a back wash gauge pressure lower than the gauge pressure of the pre-treated water, to temporarily back-wash the RO desalination elements with the delivered product water.

Back wash unit **137** may comprise a piston with a sea water chamber **136** and a product water chamber **138**. Sea water chamber **136** may be filled with the gauge pressurized pre-treated water, whereas product water chamber **138** may be filled with product water. Upon actuation (state **132**), the gauge pressure of the pre-treated water may be utilized to deliver the product water from chamber **138** at a pressure lower than the pre-treated water's gauge pressure to RO desalination elements in RO unit **130**. The pressurization of the product side in the RO desalination elements causes a reversal of flow direction over the semi-permeable membrane, as the sea water has a higher osmotic pressure than the product water, with product water moving against the gauge pressure gradient. After back-washing the membrane, the low gauge pressure of exiting product water may be used to fill chamber **138** (state **131**) after removing the gauge pressure from the pre-treated water in chamber **136**, in order to recover back wash unit **137**.

Back wash unit **137** may be part of power recovery unit **140**. For example, when power recovery unit **140** comprises a periodically back washed forward osmosis unit (not illustrated), back washing the RO elements may be carried out in relation to back washing the forward osmosis membrane elements (e.g. simultaneously or sequentially).

Direct osmosis cleaning unit **135** and back wash unit **137** may be constructed according to principles taught by WIPO Publication No. WO2004062774, i.e. by feeding concentrated saline solution to the feed side of the RO membrane under the high gauge pressure of the normal RO separation process; feeding dilute saline solution to the permeate-side of the RO membrane under higher pressure than the permeate pressure of the normal RO process, so that a net driving differential pressure is directed to the feed-side, whereby the solvent is being sucked from the permeate-side to the feed-side, penetrates into the interface between the membrane and the accumulated foulant, and separates the foulant from the membrane surface; and withdrawing the concentrated saline solution together with the separated foulant and the penetrated solvent from the feed side of the RO membrane.

In particular, direct osmosis cleaning unit **135** and back wash unit **137** may be added to system **100** to remove bacteria, originating from the pre-treatment unit **120**, from the RO membranes. Using back wash unit **137** may allow using a less expensive pre-treatment method (ground tuff instead of activated carbon porous particles **126**) and compensate for the

bacteria that were not removed in the pre-treatment. Back wash unit **137** may operate daily to remove bacteria from the membranes, and thus allow using the biological treatment although it may generate a high content of bacteria on the pre-treated water.

Post treatment unit **150** is arranged to disinfect the product water. Post treatment unit **150** may utilize any of the following methods for carrying out the disinfection: UV radiation, electrolysis and ozone. Chlorine may be electrically produced in post treatment unit **150**. For example, chlorine may be produced from the brine or chlorine may be produced from chlorides in the product water (see below), to support product water disinfection.

Post treatment unit **150** may comprise an electrolytic unit **160** arranged to load an electrode **165** operating as a cathode with CaCO_3 from the brine (stage **161**, in respect to electrode **167** operating as an anode), and operate loaded electrode **165** as an anode in the product water (stage **162**, in respect to electrode **167** operating as a cathode) to release Ca^{2+} and HCO_3^- to the product water and further generate free chlorine from chlorides in the product water, wherein the generated free chlorine is usable to disinfect the product water. For example, electrode **165** may be an inner side of a cylinder, and electrode **167** may comprise electrodes placed within the volume of the cylinder. The operative voltages between electrodes **165** and **167** may be 1-2 volts. Post treatment unit **150** uses electrolytic unit **160** to transfer minerals from the brine to the product water, as well as to produce free chlorine such as OCl^- and chlorine ions from chlorides in the product water, without having to add chlorine externally. Loading stage **161** may be carried out by switching brine flow into electrolytic unit **160** followed by washing electrolytic unit **160** before product water is introduced into electrolytic unit **160** (stage **162**).

The selected intake flowing speed, biological filter **125** and cleaning unit **135** are usable to spare external addition of chemicals to desalination system **100** and thereby spare associated chemicals' supply and storage demands. Thus, described desalination system **100** is operable in small scale and in proximity to urban regions, which otherwise prohibit the installation of chemical using desalination systems.

The new approach of the inventors is illustrated in Table 1 which presents the problems solved by the disclosed invention as well as further advantages. It should be noted that the main goal of avoiding the addition of chemicals is achieved by an integration of solutions of several elements in the desalination system, most notably in the pre and post treatment units, and involves a holistic view of the system. As shown in FIG. **3D** and the experimental data, this approach achieves a product quality which is similar to that of the prior art product.

TABLE 1

Problems solved by the disclosed invention and further advantages				
Stage	Intake unit	Pre-treatment	RO unit	Post treatment
Prior art	Addition of chlorine	Addition of chemicals against scaling, biofouling and corrosion	Operation at maximal recovery rate	Neutralizing the added chemicals in the product water
Problems	Larvae settlement	Handling the chemicals, partial efficiency, some antiscalants induce biofouling as nutrients	High energy use, some scaling and fouling, high PREN steel required	Toxic brine and environmental consequences
Solution	High intake flow speed	Floculator and filter - biological flocculation of the colloids and	Creation of inhospitable environment (low O and C levels), Operation at a	Chemical free disinfection and mineralization of

TABLE 1-continued

Problems solved by the disclosed invention and further advantages				
Stage	Intake unit	Pre-treatment	RO unit	Post treatment
		removal of the generated floc	reduced recovery rate, Power recovery	product water, Brine without added chemicals
Advantages	Prevents settlement, no chemicals	No chemicals, efficient removal of colloids	Prevention of biofouling and scaling, lower energy consumption, use of lower PREN steel	No toxic output, no additional chemicals

Focusing on added chemicals, Table 2 illustrates prior art added chemicals according to the confronted problem, and alternative solutions combined by the current invention to overcome these problems. The current invention approaches the problem holistically, solving specific problems at the level of the whole plant—e.g. by regulating levels of oxygen, carbon and mineral nutrients in the water.

TABLE 2

Replacements for chemicals in the current invention (holistic approach).		
Process (problem)	Added chemicals (Prior art solution)	Alternative measures (Current solution)
Settlement	Chlorine	High intake flow rate
Biofouling	Coagulants (e.g. ferric sulfates)	Flocculator, Reducing oxygen and carbon levels, avoiding antiscalants as nutrients
Corrosion		Lowering oxygen level
Scaling	Antiscalants	Reducing recovery rate
Post-treatment	Minerals, e.g. CaCO ₃ , disinfectors	Electrolytic transfer unit (from brine)

FIG. 5 is a high level flowchart illustrating a method 200 of operating a desalination system without any external addition of chemicals, according to some embodiments of the invention.

Method 200 comprises the following stages: supplying sea water at a flowing speed in the pipeline larger than a specified intake threshold speed (e.g. 2 m/sec, or between 1.5 and 3 m/sec) selected to prevent larvae settling in the intake pipeline (stage 205); reducing an oxygen content below an O₂ threshold (e.g. oxygen saturation, ca. 7-8 ppm or a lower level of ca. 4 ppm, depending on specific conditions) and an amount of accessible organic carbon below a C threshold (e.g. 0.5 NTU or lower) in the supplied sea water (stages 213, 214); by passing the supplied sea water upwards at a flowing speed larger than a specified pre-treatment threshold speed (e.g. between 15 and 70 m/hour) through a layer of porous particles arranged to mechanically support bacterial film generation (stage 215); to yield biological flocculation of organic and mineral material thereupon (stage 212), and separate the floc from the filter media (stage 217), optionally also removing flocculated material from the water exiting the biological flocculator (stage 220), wherein the generating specifically avoids adding iron, coagulants, flocculants and antiscalants to the supplied sea water (stage 225).

Passing the water through the layer of porous particles (stage 215) causes biological flocculation of organic and mineral colloids in the supplied seawater to generate floc (stage 212). Removing the flocculated organic material (stage 213) may comprise mechanically removing the floc to generate an organic carbon level lower than 2-3 ppm. The reduced O₂ threshold may be 7 ppm (stage 214), and generally lies at an unsaturated oxygen level. The low oxygen and carbon levels

prevent microbial attachment to the membranes and growth in the water (stage 226), resulting in prevention of fouling and scaling, as well as corrosion of metal parts, especially in the piping. The biological flocculation (stage 212) may be carried out by an upflow stage that is mixed with airlift pumps and a consecutive downflow stage for the reduction of the oxygen level (stage 223). The height and composition of the downflow filter may be selected to reduce the oxygen level below saturation in the pretreated water (stage 224).

Method 200 further comprises extracting product water and brine from the supplied sea water by reverse osmosis (stage 230).

Method 200 further comprises periodically back washing the reverse osmosis membrane during its operation at a specified frequency to remove foulants which passed through the biological flocculation and the mechanical removal (stage 212, 213) (to prevent membrane fouling) and scale nuclei therefrom (stage 235), for example back washing membrane elements with product moving against a gauge pressure gradient. Back washing (235) removes foulants and scaling nuclei that were not removed from the system by pre-treating the sea water (205-215) as well as bacteria that originate in the biological flocculation, before they compromise or damage the membranes. The backwashing frequency is selected according to the characteristics of the system and supplied water, and may be, for example a daily frequency. In particular, backwashing (stage 235) may allow using a less expensive pre-treatment method and compensate for bacteria from the biological flocculation that remain in the pre-treated water.

Method 200 further comprises disinfecting the product water (stage 240), e.g., by UV radiation, electrolysis and/or ozone. Avoiding external addition of chemicals (e.g. stage 225) is useable to spare associated chemicals' supply and storage demands.

Method 200 may further comprise of cathodically loading an electrode with CaCO₃ from the brine (stage 242) and releasing Ca²⁺ and HCO₃⁻, anodically, to the product water (stage 243), and further generating (e.g. simultaneously) free chlorine from chlorides in the product water (stage 244) for product water disinfection.

Method 200 may further comprise using self cleaning filters, cleanable by back washing, using low PREN stainless steel in the high pressure piping and implementing a configuration of eight membrane elements per pressure vessel, which diminishes power consumption.

Method 200 may further comprise simultaneously recovering gauge and osmotic power the brine (stage 245).

Method 200 may further comprise carrying out the product water extraction (stage 230) at a recovery rate lower than a specified threshold (stage 250, e.g. 40-48%), to enable a specified reduction of an input pressure of the supplied sea water and a specified reduction in brine salinity as well as to reduce or prevent scaling.

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All stages of desalination system **100** are configured to avoid the need to add chemicals externally to desalination system **100**. Prevention of membrane fouling is carried out biologically (flocculation of colloids, creation of low O and low C levels) and mechanically (high water flow speed, back washing the membrane) instead of chemically. Avoidance of chemical use allows the operation of desalination system **100** without having to store, dose and supply chemicals to it. Hence, the operation of desalination system **100** is simpler, cheaper, and compatible with urban regulations concerning chemicals.

Desalination system **100** is also optimized energetically to use minimal energy to desalinate the water by recovering power and operating at a maximal product water to energy use ratio. Minimizing energy requirements further reduce operation costs. Some of the required energy may be generated locally, e.g. from solar panels mounted upon desalination system **100**. In an overall effect, desalination system **100** requires sea water and electricity alone to produce product water.

The proposed invention advances beyond WIPO Publication No. 2006/057249, which also aims at reducing the level of chemicals in a desalination system, in several decisive aspects. In particular, the biological filter in the invention is built to support bacterial film growth in order to bind colloids, which is very different from the active carbon filter in the publication.

In the above description, an embodiment is an example or implementation of the invention. The various appearances of “one embodiment”, “an embodiment” or “some embodiments” do not necessarily all refer to the same embodiments.

Although various features of the invention may be described in the context of a single embodiment, the features may also be provided separately or in any suitable combination. Conversely, although the invention may be described herein in the context of separate embodiments for clarity, the invention may also be implemented in a single embodiment.

Furthermore, it is to be understood that the invention can be carried out or practiced in various ways and that the invention can be implemented in embodiments other than the ones outlined in the description above.

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The invention is not limited to those diagrams or to the corresponding descriptions. For example, flow need not move through each illustrated box or state, or in exactly the same order as illustrated and described.

Meanings of technical and scientific terms used herein are to be commonly understood as by one of ordinary skill in the art to which the invention belongs, unless otherwise defined.

While the invention has been described with respect to a limited number of embodiments, these should not be construed as limitations on the scope of the invention, but rather as exemplifications of some of the preferred embodiments. Other possible variations, modifications, and applications are also within the scope of the invention. Accordingly, the scope of the invention should not be limited by what has thus far been described, but by the appended claims and their legal equivalents.

What is claimed is:

1. A pre-treatment unit in a reverse osmosis (RO) desalination system, comprising:

an upflow biological flocculator, arranged to receive seawater at a flowing speed between 15 and 60 m/hour, and comprising a layer of porous particles arranged to mechanically support biofilm generation to bind and flocculate organic and mineral colloids from the water without adding coagulants of any type to the water, the biological flocculator further arranged to maintain at least oxygen saturation in the water to support biofilm generation, wherein floc is removed from water exiting the biological flocculator, and

a downflow filter receiving the water exiting the biological flocculator and having at least one filtering layer, of which a height and a composition are selected to reduce an oxygen level below saturation in the pretreated water and remove remaining floc, to suppress microbial attachment and growth in the pretreated seawater, wherein the downflow filter comprises a downflow biological filter followed by a downflow sand filter.

2. The pre-treatment unit of claim 1, wherein the porous particles in the upflow biological flocculator are ground tuff, and the porous particles in the downflow biological filter are ceramic.

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